

THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE: REPAIRING THE SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DAMAGE ON CHILD SOLDIERS IN ORDER TO RESTORE PEACE TO THEIR COMMUNITIES

Amalia Fawcett

Webster University, Geneva

An essential part of restoring peace to war-torn societies is breaking the violence in which our children exist. Earlier in this Conference, we were told of the need to respond to the damage done to children who witness or become involved in armed conflicts. I would like to reiterate that need that need with an emphasis on repairing the psychological and sociological inflicted on child soldiers in order to secure the future these children, their societies and therefore the world.

I have isolated a selection of key areas which need to be addressed if this is to be achieved. These are:

- establishing the extent of the damage;
- the nature of the problem, including difficulties in moral development and education;
- the communication blocks that need to be overcome to reach these children, and finally;
- I will dare, in my lack of experience, to suggest some solutions.

Children as young as seven are being sucked into this life and are taught to carry guns, throw grenades and in some cases kill their own people. Often, for this reason, the children are turned against their social circle in their transformation from child to soldier and when demobilisation occurs the community may be tempted to reject these tiny murderers. To retrieve these children from wherever they have withdrawn is the task that few seem willing or able to accept but there are measures being taken and solutions being tried out with varying degrees of success.

A parallel phenomenon can also be observed in the streets of violent neighbourhoods in South Africa, America and Northern Ireland, where children are arming themselves to fight other children or to assert themselves in communities that have intentionally or carelessly marginalised them. What we teach our children becomes the writing on the wall for the next world leaders and for all the children they come into contact with. It is often the nature of human frailty to ignore a problem which does not directly affect ourselves, our particular community or our particular country. This tragedy has the potential to continue a cycle of violence that will ensure that the world is continually trying to cope with conflict that is the direct result of part of a generation being brought up with only one problem solving skill—to fight 'til the death.

Establishing the damage

According to various studies the problem is relatively widespread. The January edition of the *Yale Review* which placed the total at 200,000 world-wide, warns that this is a conservative estimate. Although the numbers seem relatively small, the fact that the problem is so widespread means that it has the potential to continuously expand as each generation is taught by the one that was previously scarred. Therefore, these children will always be a risk to the restoration of peace.

The sources which I am using have cited Guatemala, Chechnya, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Mozambique, South Africa, Northern Ireland, Palestine, the US, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Angola, Liberia and Uganda as those contributing to the continuation of cyclic violence.

Without international outcry there is little hope that the people and organisations that are trying to reduce the use of armed children to further the cause of national identity or obtain political autonomy will receive the support they need. Nor will those who are attempting to rehabilitate the children who have been used thus. The fact is that when a conflict has died down, the cameras get turned off. Unfortunately the suffering does not. It is the children that carry the bitterness on to future decades, generations and conflicts. Without funding little can be done to stop this cycle.

Although the media can be used as a tool, it also has characteristics which are exacerbating the situation. Quite apart from the role it is accused of playing in such instances as the world witnessed in Colorado on April 20th 1999, in which armed youths went on a killing spree, it also has a more sinister role. There are cases being reported in which movies such as *Rambo* are being deliberately shown to youth in Sierra Leone and Liberia who are intended for appropriation by the army, the goal being to glorify violence and desensitise the children to blood and gore. An added result is that these types of movies have the most violent of their characters as the heroes. Their actions are given justification; therefore, their violence becomes shrouded with honour and enshrined by courage. The Mende tradition in Sierra Leone compares the *Rambo* character to a mythical trickster whose stories are supposed to remind elders to look after their children and direct their energies for productive purposes¹—a poignant reminder to the International Community.

The nature of the problem

Exposure to violence: A civil war rips a country apart and swallows up many of its children. When as young as seven they will be used as combatants, cooks, spies and bodyguards, others are part of organised ranks and receive the same training and equipment as their adult counterparts. Many

¹ Maier, Karl. 'The Universal Soldier', *Yale Review*, Jan 1998, v 86, pg. 70.

young girls are forced into military action which often comprises sexual slavery resulting in them being rendered impure in the eyes of their former communities so when demobilisation occurs, prostitution can soon follow.

Children are acquired through coercion or abduction and then the sensitisation process begins. To weaken resistance to recruitment, some victims are maimed so others will learn a lesson of submission, others are forced to kill someone from their village to ensure the bond between child and community is broken. This is the beginning of a process which involves, in the words of Mike Wessells², "fear, brutality and psychological manipulation" to achieve the goal of obedient, efficient and unquestioning killers. Verbal humiliation and physical abuse are a child's initiation. Desensitising the children turns them into effective soldiers but the experience lasts long after demobilisation.

It is evident through a variety of studies on the effects of violence that victims often become perpetrators, simply repeating behaviour that they learn. A complicating factor in this situation is that the children are taken away from their positive and normal role models at an extremely early age and have not yet reached a sufficient level of moral development to enable them to accurately assess the situation on terms of good and bad. Often they are convinced that their fight is one of good versus evil, and therefore has the blessing of their divinity.

Hindered Moral and Educational Development: A psychologist by the name of Lawrence Kohlberg³ has isolated six stages of moral development which can be fitted into one of three categories: pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional.

Most of the children involved would fit into either the pre-conventional or conventional stages in which decisions of a moral nature are made based on punishment orientation, pleasure-seeking orientation or authority orientation. There is no concept of loyalty, justice or gratitude. When a child is operating from this point of view, a commander can easily take advantage of the lack of loyalty to destroy the links with family and community. The authority orientation means that a child is focused on upholding law and order and obeying authority, yet, there is no ability to determine whether that social order is a good one or not.

In a normal environment a child is exposed to role models who are operating from the social contract point of view or the morality of personal principles. Both allow for the critical assessment of the nature of the rules and laws with which you are dealing, so children should be able to move successfully through all the stages. There is next to no chance that decisions made by young people exposed to role models who have encouraged the self centred and undeveloped moral reasoning of a child will be capable of resisting the urge to steal, kill or rape.

² Wessells, Mike. 'Child Soldiers: in some places, if you're as tall as a rifle, you're old enough to carry one.' *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, Nov-Dec 1997, v. 53.

³ Coon, Denis. *Essentials of Psychology*, Seventh edition, Brooks/Cole Publishing, California, 1997.

Also effected by the child's involvement in the army is his or her preparation for life outside the army from an occupational perspective. Most are not out of primary education before they join the violence, and have no practical skills to speak of. This means that they will further exacerbate the poverty of their regions (as most of these children are from poor areas). They will return being able to contribute nothing but instead will probably be a great expense, as they will re-enter their communities psychologically and physically scarred. This will mean that the countries will require more monetary aid, which again, if there was any doubt, thrusts this into the international arena.

Communication blocks: An essential part of the process of recovering these children is to establish an open and effective communication between them and their caregivers. If the child is lucky enough to have a family or social network to return to, then often traditional methods will re-establish this link. For those who are not as fortunate there are many potential blocks that will need to be dealt with before gaining a child's respect and trust.

The difficulties to which I am about to refer have been identified as barriers to intercultural communication by Fred E. Jandt⁴, a sociologist. Although his analysis deals primarily with the meeting of two cultures, they are equally applicable to this situation.

Anxiety is an understandable reaction when dealing with children who have maimed, murdered and become anything but children. Jandt points out that when in a process of communication with any individual, if anxiety is not at least partly controlled then you are likely to become so focused on your anxiety that you are no longer fully present in the interaction. In this case it would be possible for a child, no matter how traumatised, to pick up on your feelings, resent them, adopt them or, take advantage of them. It must be remembered that these children have often been part of highly organised armed forces. Moreover, they have been schooled in the art of survival at all costs, reading your opponent and picking up on weaknesses would be an effective way of maintaining your position in the hierarchy of army life.

The caregiver must not assume that this child is so fundamentally changed by his or her army experience that he or she will no longer react to things in the manner of a child. This can lead to important things that these children have in common with other children being overlooked. A poignant example of just how childlike these soldiers can be is the fact that many are given bits of broken mirror and woollen tassels which they are told, will shield them from bullets. The December '98 edition of *The Economist* cited an example of a thirteen year old who believed the animal horn he had been given by his commanders would protect him in battle—a "controller" with which he could control the path of enemy bullets.

⁴ Jandt, Fred. *Intercultural Communication*, second edition, Sage Publications, California, 1998.

Another particularly damaging block to communication is ethnocentrism. People have, in the past, gone to countries to find solutions which would only be appropriate to their own culture and not the one in which they are working. Nowadays, I would like to believe this does not happen so often. Yet we must remain ever vigilant against it. These children must be accepted back into their own societies, therefore must be healed according to the practices and beliefs of that culture. Not only is this good for the community but also for the child. A child in Mozambique may benefit psychologically from the kind of traditional purification ceremony that allows the child to be born again, no longer being tarnished by his or her past as a soldier. Another child may benefit more from a Christian-style confession and forgiveness process. Caution is needed though because the one child will benefit only from what he or she believes in. One practice will not enable all children to lay the ghosts of their past to rest.

Solutions

As Yves Sandoz said earlier, the use of children is a crime according to the International Criminal Court. We need to disseminate this fact and enforce it. There has been a suggestion of a special UN protection force for children—this should be made a reality.

We also need greater teacher support for those in refugee camps and to establish the type of initiative seen in Liberia, which was highlighted by Shahrzad Tadjbakhsh in her presentation, world-wide.

Another essential part of protecting children is to gain the ratification of a world leader—the United States—of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is essential if we are to persuade others to live by its rules. International pressure should be used to achieve it.

From a psychological point of view, organisations like Doctors without Borders need to maintain doctor to doctor networks even in peaceful times with psychologists and psychiatrists, so the countries in crisis can become a little more independent in their recovery.

Essentially we need to launch a media campaign the type of which brought world attention to land-mines. These children need our voices, as they do not have the means to attract attention to their plight and may not even see alternatives to it.

This problem hurts the children, the economy and therefore the peace and prosperity we are all fighting for, but will loose if we do not reintegrate these children. It is imperative to include them in the process of peace restoration in their communities, as they are the ones to whom it must eventually be left. They must be given an idea of their worth, dignity and the power of education so we can feel at ease when the peace is achieved, that it will have a better chance of survival when left in their hands.